Executive Summary
Direct Investigation Operation Report

Government's Provision of Public Services Relating to the After-death Arrangements

Introduction

In Hong Kong, public services relating to after-death arrangements including death registration, mortuary services, cremation and coffin burial services are provided by different government departments. Taking care of after-death arrangements requires time and effort and dealing with the loss of a loved one at the same time is not an easy process.

2. While overcoming with grief for the loss of a beloved family member, the bereaved have to deal with various formalities for after-death arrangements. If the Government can improve the dissemination of information on related public services, simplify the application procedures for such services and digitalise or personalise the workflows of death registration and related applications, it should significantly reduce the pressure and emotional stress on the bereaved in dealing with the formalities for after-death arrangements, as well as enhancing the work efficiency of relevant government departments.

3. Moreover, government statistics show that with an ageing trend in Hong Kong's population, the demand for public services relating to the after-death arrangements, including death registration, mortuary services and burial arrangements, continues to rise. Members of the public are increasingly concerned about the arrangements for such services and dissemination of related information. Hence, the Office has examined the Government's provision of public services relating to the after-death arrangements and dissemination of related information. Based on our findings, we have the following observations and comments.

Our Findings

Creating A One-stop Thematic Website

4. Currently, information about the formalities for after-death arrangements can be found on the webpage, "Services and Support for the Bereaved" of the government

website, Gov.HK. Nevertheless, it is difficult for the bereaved to find the information they need because they have to click on the links, one by one, to look for the information from the website of different government departments. Take death registration as an example, clicking on "Forms related to deaths registration" will link to the webpage of "Births and Deaths Registration" on ImmD's website. On that page, nine application forms relating to births and deaths registration and other services are available, including the forms for "Application for Search of Record of Birth in Hong Kong", "Application for a Certified Copy of an Entry in the Deaths Register" and "Application for Search of Record of Death in Hong Kong". Members of the public will have to spend time browsing the websites of different departments and checking one webpage or another before they can find the forms or information they need.

5. In our view, for better support and assistance to the bereaved in dealing with after-death arrangements for the deceased, relevant departments should explore developing a one-stop thematic website on after-death public services offered by all the relevant departments to provide standard and consistent information. The contents of the website may include information on the application procedures for related services provided by FEHD, ImmD, DH and HA, clear guidelines, relevant legal procedures and required documents as well as answers to frequently asked questions.

6. We noticed that in the past the bereaved had to go to the offices of individual departments to complete the formalities for after-death arrangements in person due to the lack of digitalised services. For that reason, some chose to engage a funeral agent to deal with the formalities for related public services. The Office has from time to time received complaints about inadequacy in the digitalisation of public services relating to the after-death arrangements. For example, even if the bereaved have submitted an online application for allocation of a renewable new niche via FEHD's online system, the Platform for Cemeteries and Crematoria Services, they still have to complete the verification of death documents and pay the fee at FEHD offices because the online system does not support verification of cremation cases on the same day. Subsequent to our intervention, FEHD launched the "After-death Arrangements" thematic website in November this year to provide an integrated platform for the public to handle cemeteries and crematoria services. Upon launching of the online platform, the same situation in the aforesaid example can be handled, that is, verification of cremation cases on the same day could be handled and the bereaved need not complete the verification formality and settle the payment at FEHD offices in person.

7. In recent years, the Government has stepped up the pace of building a digital government and promoting digitalisation of government services. We consider that in keeping with this, the relevant departments should provide online application for more public services relating to the after-death arrangements on the one-stop thematic website. They should also make good use of the "iAM Smart+" mobile app to promote digitalised after-death public services so that the bereaved could complete relevant procedures more quickly. That could save the bereaved the trouble of having to make such applications in person. We have noticed that FEHD had launched the "After-death Arrangements" thematic website to facilitate the bereaved to apply for green burials online and to search for information about licensed undertakers of burials. In this light, we recommend that based on the online platform launched by FEHD, the Government further explores the development of a one-stop thematic website, offering inter-departmental and relevant e-service applications relating to after-death public services provided by all relevant departments.

8. In the long run, as people have become more open-minded about after-death arrangements, the relevant departments may study the feasibility of expanding the functions in the one-stop thematic website to provide personalised services and collect data for sharing among the departments so as to assist the public to plan ahead for their after-death arrangements. For example, the website may allow the public to pre-set their personal medical directive and indicate their choices of end-of-life care service and burial. Besides, the Government may develop a central database to document all these types of information so that the relevant departments and HA can use the data collected to follow up on the decisions of members of the public on after-death arrangements. The one-stop thematic website should also include the function to allow the bereaved to learn about the deceased's decision on their after-death arrangements. For example, members of the public can give consent to sending a timely notification to their family of their option for after-death arrangements by activating the function of an email reminder. That would make it easier for the bereaved to take care of the after-death arrangements according to the wish of the deceased. It can also save the bereaved the trouble of having to provide information of the deceased to different departments separately, thus lessening the impact on their lives at the time they are still mourning the death of their beloved ones.

9. While we acknowledge the importance of safeguarding personal data, we consider that relevant departments should promote digitalisation of public services relating to the after-death arrangements and at the same time examine how the information including the after-death arrangements that involve the deceased's privacy

should be managed and maintained in the central database. In devising the information system, the departments should also draw up guidelines and formulate measures to ensure data protection for workflows including collection, storage, use and transfer of data.

Thematic Website Should Cater for Needs of Ethnic Minorities and Different Cultures

10. Hong Kong is a multicultural society and home to over 300,000 ethnic minorities. The Government of HKSAR is determined to build a caring and inclusive community and has been providing comprehensive support to ethnic minorities. Handling after-death formalities for the deceased involves legal and administrative procedures, which would prove to be even more complicated for non-Chinese speakers, not to mention that different cultures have different customs and taboos surrounding the topic of death. We consider that the one-stop thematic website, in addition to providing information in more languages, should be culture-sensitive and careful in the choice of wording and graphics, as well as provide answers to frequently asked questions among ethnic minorities. Better still, the content of the one-stop thematic website can be categorised by religion and ethnicity.

Stepping up Promotion through Seminars And Publicity

11. The Government is vigorously promoting green burials in the society so that cremains of the deceased can be handled in a more environmentally-friendly and sustainable manner. Green burials are gaining popularity, and latest statistics show that this option was adopted in after-death arrangements of 18.2% of the total number of deaths in a year. We agree with FEHD that changing customs and traditions takes time. The Department should collaborate with other government departments so that green burial can gradually become the preferred option of the public when they handle cremated ashes.

12. In this light, we consider that the Government should strengthen publicity and public education such as coordinating relevant departments or public organisations to hold seminars or forums periodically (e.g. every quarter) for the public, inviting staff of the relevant government departments and professionals (such as legal consultants and funeral service providers) to explain the services relating to after-death formalities and answer public queries so that members of the public can better understand after-death arrangements and relevant issues. Such seminars or forums can also serve as a platform for the public to reflect their views on the procedural arrangements for after-death formalities to the Administration.

13. Furthermore, the Government has amended relevant legislation to facilitate the choice of dying in place for terminally ill patients in prescribed residential care homes in accordance with the wish and needs of the patients and their family. The amended legislation is intended for provision of quality and comprehensive end-of-life care for those patients, allowing them to spend their final days in a familiar place of their choice such as their home, an elderly home or a nursing home. In our view, relevant departments or authorities including HA should provide more information on dying in place to those using the services of prescribed care homes so that the public can better understand the new arrangements in the amended legislation.

Considering the provision of additional storage facilities for dead bodies in mortuaries

14. According to the data provided by DH, taking into account the population growth and the number of deaths in Hong Kong, it is estimated that the public mortuaries in Hong Kong will need to provide a total storage capacity of about 1,300 bodies by 2031 to meet the projected demand. DH has already reprovisioned the Fu Shan Public Mortuary in 2022 and plans to reprovision the Victoria Public Mortuary, so as to increase the total storage capacity of public mortuaries to cope with the demand in the longer term. In addition, HA has been closely monitoring the utilization of hospital mortuaries and has indicated that it will rationalize the planning and increase the storage capacity of facilities for storing dead bodies.

15. We are of the view that with the growth and ageing of the population in Hong Kong, DH and HA should review the utilisation of mortuaries from time to time and consider in a timely manner the need to increase the number of storage facilities for the dead in public mortuaries and hospital mortuaries to cope with the challenges that may arise in the future.

Formulating Emergency Plans for Public Services Relating to Formalities for After-death Arrangements

16. All the departments and the authority concerned should explore the formulation of an emergency response system and make good plans for risk management to prepare for any upsurge in demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements following major accidents or emergencies. Specifically, the government departments should plan for measures and coordination for provision of such public services in case of different emergencies to ensure that they could respond to such emergencies in the most efficient and quickest way.

17. Meanwhile, all the departments and the authority concerned should arrange regular staff training to increase their staff's alertness to emergencies of difficult magnitude and enhance the coordination and capability of the departments and the authority in providing public services relating to after-death arrangements. In the long run, they should also consider redeploying manpower or adding resources to meet the rising demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements in view of the ageing trend in Hong Kong's population.

Recommendations

18. In light of the above, The Ombudsman's main recommendations to FEHD, DH, HA and ImmD are as follows:

(1) **All the departments** should discuss and examine the feasibility of developing a one-stop thematic website providing information about the public services provided by each of them regarding after-death arrangements;

(2) **All the departments** should explore using a one-stop thematic website to further digitalise public services relating to after-death arrangements. They should consider providing more electronic application procedures and personalised services to make it more convenient for the bereaved;

(3) **All the departments** should examine how the content of the thematic website can meet the needs of people of different races and cultures;

(4) **FEHD and the department or authority concerned** should organise seminars or forums to explain information and share experiences relating to after-death arrangements on a regular basis;

(5) **HA and the department or authority concerned** should provide more information on dying in place to their service users as well as giving more publicity to the new arrangements in the amended legislation that make it more convenient for patients to choose to die in place;

(6) **DH** should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in public mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong;

(7) **HA** should regularly review the availability of body storage facilities in hospital mortuaries and consider installing additional units in response to the population growth and the ageing trend in Hong Kong;

(8) **All the departments** should consolidate previous experiences and explore the establishment of an emergency response system and implementation of relevant measures regarding provision of public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents to prepare for sudden challenges;

(9) **All the departments** should conclude previous experiences and arrange regular training to staff providing public services relating to after-death arrangements at the time of emergencies or major accidents, with the aim of increasing the staff's alertness and capability in handling emergencies of a sizeable magnitude; and

(10) **All the departments and the authority concerned** should be flexible in redeploying internal resources to meet the rising demand for public services relating to after-death arrangements alongside the ageing trend in Hong Kong's population.

Office of The Ombudsman
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